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Domesticity

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DOMESTICITY

Ken Kenyon

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “recognition” as the action or fact of perceiving that some thing, person, etc., is the same as one previously known. I have experienced this awareness a few times while working in the University Archives. Recognizing early Cal Poly football coach Howie O’Daniels downtown a number of years ago, and listening to Don McMillan, “The Sage of Shandon,” speak at Cal Poly in the early 1980s are instances that come to mind.

Flossie Matasci, a 1909 Household Arts graduate, invoked a similar kind of recognition in me. Happening upon an old photo, I was certain that I had met her, and for some reason, which is as mysterious as Miss Matasci herself, this became important to me. Not a story about déjà vu, the search instilled in me an appreciation and knowledge of the now non-existent Cal Poly Home Economics Department.



It all began at Thanksgiving when the media descended upon us wanting all they could get on Sophie Huchting Cubbison, the Cal Poly 1912 Household Arts graduate who was the founder of Mrs. Cubbison’s Stuffing, the famous stuffing that we devour each year in mass quantities. Tony Cipolla of KSBY even came up to the University Archives to interview the archivist and author Nancy Loe.

In the course of helping other Home Economics researchers, I retrieved Marjory Martinson’s office papers. Martinson founded the new Home Economics Department at Cal Poly when women returned in 1956, serving as department head from 1955-1966.

In the history file of this collection, I found Virginia B. Vincenti’s “Antecedents of Reformism.” This short article, published in the Fall 1983 issue of the *Journal of Home Economics*, chronicled the evolution of home economics from an art to a science in the United States.



Campus view with a train. 1907. Photo courtesy of University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library

“The significant early periods in the development of home economics as a profession were periods of intense reformism in the United States,” Vincenti wrote. “During the 1840s, Catharine Beecher, a reformer of education for girls and women and promoter of education in the schools, published her textbook, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*.”

As I was pulling materials, I couldn’t help but reflect on Barbara Goldsmith’s exciting 1998 book, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, which is an excellent commentary on the Beechers as well as Woodhull. Catharine Beecher was unique among her famous brothers and sisters, which included author Harriet Beecher Stowe and clergyman Henry Ward Beecher. Goldsmith says of Catherine Beecher: “She was unmarried and a virgin but was considered America’s prime expert on childrearing and ‘domestic economy.’”

Miss Beecher believed that “women should use gentle wiles to persuade the men who

dominated them, on the theory that they would not deny their dutiful wives and children,” said Goldsmith. Catharine Beecher wasn’t an advocate of free love and spiritualism like Victoria Woodhull, nor did she advocate women becoming involved in politics. She believed that education improved the lives of women, in and out of the home.

Goldsmith observed that Ms. Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy* “included twelve pages ‘On Washing,’ eleven pages ‘On Whitening, Cleaning, and Dyeing,’ and seven pages on preparing to wear a garment.’ Her list of some twenty items required for doing laundry was so demanding and detailed that it took massive concentration just to read it.”

In January, while researching the dissolution of Home Economics in the 1990s, as well as the department’s early beginnings, I happened upon Flossie Matasci’s senior class photograph in the June 1909 commencement issue of the *Polytechnic Journal*. This monthly student journal, first published in January 1906, highlighted stories on agriculture, mechanics, and the domestic arts, as well as social happenings, sports, editorials and joshes.

I recognized her instantly, but I couldn’t recollect the circumstances of our meeting. In the Horoscope column, she described her present condition as “overworked” and chose the religious hymn “I Am Content” as her favorite song. Her ambition was “to live on the Osos,” and for her future, she stated, “suffragette.”

I thought it pertinent that the April 1909 *Polytechnic Journal* had a blurb about Mrs. Clara B. Colby of Portland, Oregon, giving an address on woman’s suffrage at the school. Mrs. Colby had attended many suffrage conventions and observed “first hand the agitation in England.” It occurred to me that Flossie Matasci might have been inspired by Mrs. Colby’s presentation, or had at least attended it.

In the February 1909 issue of the journal, there is also reference made to a debate in Ms. Chase’s English class on the question, “Resolved that women should be given the right to vote.” Victory went to the affirmative.

As an aside, Margaret Chase liked to say that she came to Cal Poly with the palm trees in 1908, remarking that the “preparation for their coming was made by the blasting of rock along California Drive that their roots might have a place to grow.” It’s an exaggeration on my part to state that she enjoyed saying that, but she did say it more than once, I believe. Ms. Chase went on to serve as interim director in 1924. Chase Hall is named after her.

I didn’t expect to find Flossie Matasci listed in the San Luis Obispo city directories. I thought that young women of the early 1900s studied the household arts to prepare themselves for marriage, so to find an unmarried Miss Matasci surprised me.

This discovery brought back memories of my living on Osos Street back in 1969, and then again as a student a few years later at different places in San Luis Obispo. Perhaps I had passed her downtown, but I sensed that there was more to it.

Recently, on a free Saturday afternoon, I walked by what had once been Miss Matasci’s

home on Broad Street. It was a quaint little house with window shutters and a narrow porch. The front yard was enclosed by a low stone wall. Knowing that she had died sometime in 1977, I became concerned that I was disturbing her peace.

The neighborhood brought back memories. I had done some interior painting in the large Victorian across the street from Miss Matasci's in the early seventies. I vaguely remembered seeing a woman out in front of the house. I may have spoken to her. Knowing how my mind works sometimes, it was probably all different from what I remember, but there had been someone.



The key event at the Polytechnic School in 1907 was the completion of the Household Arts Building. "This structure, forty-three by one hundred feet, containing a basement and two stories, was of excellent construction," wrote Morris Eugene Smith in *A History of California Polytechnic School, The First Fifty Years, 1901-1951*. "It included a reception room for school guests, sewing and millinery rooms, cooking laboratories and both gas and wood ranges, classrooms, and offices."

In the beginning, Agriculture, Mechanics, and the Household Arts were offered at the Polytechnic School, with the women enrolled in the domestic sciences. Today, of course, women fill all majors at Cal Poly in substantial numbers; as of 2001, women outnumber men in the colleges of Agriculture, Liberal Arts, and Science and Math. Over the years, men have also chosen Home Economics as a major as evidenced in the 1979 *Mustang Daily* story, "Home Economics No Piece of Cake for Male Majors." One of the ten males enrolled in that major said that the home economics and dietetic courses were the most competitive classes that he had ever taken.

Mary F. Cheda's commencement paper, "The Value of Domestic Science in a Girl's Education" was the lead story in the October 1908 *Polytechnic Journal*. To quote Cheda, "In these progressive times when women are on the same footing as men, along educational lines, the home is apt to be forgotten in the struggle for higher education and a career."

She further stated, "Men spend much time and money in studying the right kind of proportion of foods to develop the best qualities of domestic animals. Is it not of far more importance that our boys and girls should be so nourished that their best mental qualities will be developed?"

I personally enjoyed, "Too often the desire for fine clothing and ornament have overcome the desire for the essentials of a convenient kitchen. No woman likes to cook if her kitchen is the dreariest room of the house and equipped with worn-out utensils." Bravo! In our *even* more progressive times, it's inspiring to see my son cooking for his family in a free and spacious, well-lit kitchen space.

Flossie Matasci, unlike Cheda and other classmates, wasn't the most visible of stu-

dents; she's not found in the *Polytechnic Journal* Social Happenings column. The close-knit school of about 150 students enjoyed receptions, barn dances, masquerade balls, barbeques, picnics, parades, and dances that ended promptly at 11 p.m.

"The dormitory was the center of early campus life, where faculty and students took meals," according to the Centennial book, *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*. "Social events, chaperoned by staff and faculty, included weekly dances and singing around the dormitory piano, often played by a faculty or staff member."

At first I attributed Miss Matasci's absence to living off campus, but most of the women must have lived off campus until the women's dormitory was built in September of 1909. The June 1909 Senior Prophecy column did make it known that she was quite social: "Flossie Matasci with her wavy brown hair will continue to charm all whom she meets and will ever be surrounded by a large circle of friends."

While doing my utmost to determine what was so familiar about her, I became immersed in the first decade of the 1900s. The year of her graduation was exciting nationally and internationally. In March 1909, William Howard Taft was inaugurated as president and "Shine on Harvest Moon," a Ziegfeld Follies hit, was still popular. In *The Timetables of History*, Sigmund Freud was lecturing in the United States, D.W. Griffith featured the first film star, Mary Pickford, Matisse painted *The Dance*, the Richard Strauss opera *Electra* was performed in Dresden, and American writer Gertrude Stein, a close friend of Picasso and Matisse, was writing in Paris.



One evening in February, the first of many recollections came to me. I remembered a lady back in the 1970s, who resembled Miss Matasci, wrapping her arm up into mine at the corner of Marsh and Broad streets, down from where she had lived, asking me in a low, desperate and worn, though steady voice to help her across the street.

It was a long crossing. I recall hoping that we'd make it to the other side before the light changed. I was still in my late twenties or early thirties at the time, and she, I thought, was probably in her late seventies or early eighties.

As we proceeded, I searched my mind for something to say, but nothing surfaced. We just kept walking and smiling. She was dressed in a brown dress which I remember to be quite fashionable and smart, and a matching hat with a narrow brim, I think. There was something flowery and soft, yet stiff about her. I could tell that she had once been—and was still—quite beautiful. At the other side of the street, she broke away and rushed down Marsh, wobbling on her medium-high heels. Alarmed, I felt that I should follow her, but certain that I had been thanked and brushed off, I continued on my way. Had this woman been suffragette Flossie Matasci? Although she bore a distinct resemblance, it most likely wasn't Miss Matasci. Or was it?



The GenData Sonogno page of the *Sonogno* website, containing genealogical data of families from Sonogno, lists Benigno (Benjamin) Matasci, of San Luis Obispo. B.C. Matasci came to Cayucos from Canton Tincino, Switzerland, and married Caterina Franscella of San Luis Obispo in 1889. Maria (Flossie) Matasci was born Oct. 20, 1890, in San Benito, California, and died March 16, 1977 in San Luis Obispo. It is indicated that she never married: “non risulta sposata.”

The 1909 fourth annual commencement of the California Polytechnic School lists her as Flossie Mary Matasci. Elsewhere she is Flossie Matasci, Flossie M. Matasci, and Miss Matasci. She signed her name, I later discovered, “Flossie Matasci.” In the San Luis Obispo directories, she is a householder as well as a home owner. The Matasci family owned property in San Luis Obispo.

“Miss Matasci,” according to the *San Luis Obispo County Telegram-Tribune*, “was born in the Toro Creek area on the family ranch,” not San Benito. “She moved to San Luis Obispo in 1900.” She was the last of her family, except for one cousin who lived in Beverly Hills. She had been a lifelong resident of San Luis Obispo and an active member of the Old Mission Parish, and was buried in the family plot at the Old Mission Cemetery.

The short obituary stated that Flossie M. Matasci, 86, was “one of the few remaining graduates of the 1906 class of Cal Poly.” It’s not correct to say that Flossie was a member of the first graduating class of 1906 because she, of course, graduated in 1909.

I can imagine Miss Matasci during the spring of 1909, walking out over the campus’ rolling terrain with a lot on her mind. According to a Feb. 10, 1909, *Daily Tribune* article, each Household Arts student, as a graduation requirement, had to take part in a series of luncheons, to include being a servant, a hostess, and then finally to “plan the menu, prepare the meal, invite a few members of the faculty, and preside over the function in proper style.” Instructor Miss Secrest was a guest on each occasion.

The large class of 1909 had witnessed a great deal of change at the school. Leroy Anderson, the Polytechnic School’s first director, departed in December of 1907, with the students in the farewell assembly singing his favorite song, “Holy, Holy, Holy” in his honor, wrote Morris Eugene Smith in his history. Leroy Burns Smith took his place. At the time there were three main structures sitting on about 310 acres. “Thousands of trees and shrubs were gradually changing the appearance of the former treeless fields,” said Smith.

Household Arts students were active at the California Polytechnic School. Rachael Gould, Hazel Griffith, and Rachael Ramage, all of San Luis Obispo, were on the *Polytechnic Journal* staff and the girls’ basketball team, coached by Margaret Chase. Gould had been junior class vice-president and Griffith the senior class vice-president.

The class spade, which was used to plant the class tree on the grounds each year, was

passed along to the next class. The Class Will was also published in the June commencement issue of the *Polytechnic Journal*.


Household Arts student Rachael Gould left her “cozy little corner on Pacific Street to Clara Pavia,” her “great love for Sunday walks and moving picture shows to Leland Smith,” and “her habit of staying out late to Diana Kendall and Aubrey Dixon, providing that they do not stay out later than three o’clock.”

Hazel Griffith left her “sunny disposition and popularity with the sterner sex to Cora Schulze,” her “love of dancing and good attention while in class to Dorothy Mott,” and her “ability to convert the mechanics into botanists to Bess Holloway as I think it will be of great benefit to the school.”

Rachael Ramage left her “ability to entertain in the home to Diana Kendall,” her “winning ways and power of capturing the opposite sex to Dorothy Mott,” and “her mode of transportation to See Canyon to Aubrey Dixon as he has had experience in that line,” and “her bridge on Santa Rosa Street to Clara Pavia.”

Flossie Matasci, whose hobby was “bluffing,” her peculiarity, “looking wise,” and whose principal illness, like others in her class, a “faint heart,” left her “stunt of taking walks during geometry class to Ray Briggs.” Last, she said, “I leave my cozy home on the Osos to who ever can ‘win’ him.” What she meant by that, I’m not quite certain.

Miss Matasci returned to Cal Poly at least a few times. I was moved to find her signature—the first time that I had ever seen it—in the *Visitor’s Book* of the June 11, 1915, Farmer’s Picnic. The Farmer’s Institute and Basket Picnic was a predecessor of Poly Royal.

I now clearly remember having met Miss Matasci in 1969 or 1970. I’m not certain of the circumstances, however. It’s most likely I did work for her. I have pleasant memories, so we must have hit it off. In the 1970s and ’80s, there were still many Cal Poly old-timers living in San Luis Obispo. I wish that I would have known enough to talk to Miss Matasci about the early days. 

Notes

Photos on the following pages are courtesy of University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library.



1909 Household Arts graduate, Flossie Matasci. Photo courtesy of University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library



Dressmaking class in the "Recitation Building" before the construction of the Household Arts Building, Circular of the Polytechnic School, 1905. Photo courtesy of University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library



Household Arts building, completed in 1907. Photo courtesy of University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library



Cooking class in the Household Arts Building, California Polytechnic School Catalogue, 1907-08. Photo courtesy of University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library